

# SENATE PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMITTEE

## TESTIMONY ON SENATE BILL 3

**JIM WINDHAM**  
**CHAIRMAN, TEXAS INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION REFORM (TIER)**  
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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on SB 3, which is an important attempt to revise and enhance the Texas public school accountability system. Our organization has been privileged to have worked with Committee leadership and staff as well as the Select Committee on Public School Accountability over the past year in crafting solutions to the future of our system, which has served us well, but is in need of refinements that will move Texas back into a position of national leadership in standards and accountability based education reform.

TIER and its allies in the Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce believe that there are several attractive features of the bill that represent advances in the current accountability system. However, there are a number of very serious problems with it, the more significant of which have been outlined in the attachments to my testimony.

In the brief time allotted, I want to focus on the overarching concern from which most of the other problems are derivative. This is the fact that the bill fails to establish as the organizing principle of the Texas accountability system one definition and one high school exit standard for post secondary readiness, for which we have adapted the definition approved by the Texas High School Completion and Success Initiatives Council, as follows:

“The range of academic, workforce, and social proficiency that high school students should acquire to successfully transition to skilled employment, advanced military training, an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, or technical and industry certification, without the need for remediation.”

A proxy for this definition is community college readiness without remediation. This we believe is the minimally acceptable standard of expectation for all Texas students who pursue the Recommended Plan or the proposed Texas Diploma, regardless of the post secondary path they choose.

From this organizing principle flows grade level benchmarked standards along the K-12 “ramp” leading to the post secondary readiness exit; vertically scaled assessments with value-added capability measuring growth along the way; criteria holding schools accountable for student progress; and interventions to help those educators and students in need.

And we believe that there should be many pathways to this exit standard, including Career and Technology Education options which we have identified in our policy recommendations, but the motto and guiding principle should be “one standard, many pathways, and equal rigor”. To

expect less of our kids is to deprive them of the enrichment that they will need to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Governor's Competitiveness Council seems to agree. In its July 2008 report to the Governor, it states: "The essential knowledge and skills required to graduate college- or workforce-ready are the same and should be taught to all students." This is consistent with the policies of the most advanced states, the preponderance of research on career and college readiness, and consensus within the education policy community.

We believe that the bifurcation of standards for the Texas Diploma to provide for a career and technical pathway of less demanding rigor will be a mistake for Texas. It will academically impoverish our students and diminish their long term prospects for success and will be a setback for our state in its education policy leadership that has produced meaningful advancement in student achievement over the past two decades.

We look forward to working with you to correct this deficiency and its derivative problems so that we can be supportive of SB 3. Thank you.

Testimony to the House Public Education Committee on HB 3  
Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce

The Texas Coalition for a Competitive Workforce has been very supportive of the work of the Select Committee on Public School Accountability and the corresponding changes to the state's accountability system..

After reviewing SB 3 and HB 3, however, we discovered several potential problem areas that we believe work against the goals that we support and that the Select Committee recommended. These areas are outlined below and we hope that we can resolve them with the committee so that we can fully support Senate Bill 3.

Issue 1: Establishing a single postsecondary readiness standard

Many of the problem areas of SB 3 stem from the fact that it does not establish a single base definition and a single base standard for postsecondary readiness—a standard that students must meet whether they choose to attend a four-year or two-year college, pursue industry training, enlist in the military, or enter the workforce. This standard assures that students have the basic knowledge and skills to become “trainable” in a variety of fields. This idea of “one standard, multiple pathways, and equal rigor” for the Texas Diploma ensures that students can pursue different educational paths, change jobs, or change careers without needing remediation.

Our impression was that passing Algebra II and English III was a proxy for college and career readiness (with science and social studies standards to be set later). No matter what path a student chooses, we believe that they must be able to demonstrate at least this level of knowledge to succeed after high school. If we can reestablish this goal in SB 3, a lot of the other problem areas will be resolved.

**Recommendation: Reestablish a single postsecondary readiness standard—Algebra II, English III, and future science and social studies standards—for all students regardless of the postsecondary path they choose.**

Issue 2: Alternative Performance Standards and End-of-course Exams

SB 3 allows students to receive the “Texas Diploma” (formerly the “Recommended Diploma”) by earning an industry certificate—even if they fail the Algebra II and English III end-of-course exams. There are three glaring problems with this proposal. First, the end-of-course exams are the only measure the state has to ensure that students have mastered the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for a subject. Schools and teachers may grade students differently, but the end-of-course exams provide a yardstick to certify that students have mastered the basics of the course. We understand that these exams count as 15% of a student's course grade under the bill, but this does not ensure that they know the material. For example, a student with a class average of 71% could score a zero on the end-of-course exam and still pass the course with a 60%. This student, who scored a zero on the English III exam, the Algebra II exam, or both, could still receive the Texas Diploma certifying college and career readiness by earning an industry certification.

In addition, students would not be required to pass the other required end-of-course exams in order to graduate. We are surprised that this bill would retreat from the principles of SB 1031 that recognized the importance of testing students' competency in the core subject areas.

Finally, while some industry certificates require the practical application of English II and Algebra III standards, SB 3 does not require that students earn such a certificate. Instead, we rely on the Texas Workforce Commission to compile a list of "high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill" occupations that have certifications. SB 3 provides no other criteria by which to judge the appropriateness of these occupations. The high-demand, high-wage, and high-skill job of today may be gone tomorrow and some students may be left with a worthless certificate and few basic skills.

**Recommendations: Remove the alternative performance standard as a way to earn the Texas Diploma. All students earning the Texas Diploma should pass the 4 x 4 classes and at least 2 end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra II and English III exams. Students that are unable or unwilling to do so may still earn the Standard Diploma. Require students earning the Standard Diploma to pass at least two end-of-course exams in each core subject area—including the Algebra I and English III exams. Maintain SBOE oversight of the 4 x 4 course requirements and substitutions.**

#### Issue 3: Promotion of Students who Fail an Assessment

While current law discourages social promotion, it remains a common occurrence in Texas schools. Research shows that students who fail assessments and are promoted fail future assessments at an alarming rate. On the other hand, students that repeat a grade pass assessments at a much higher rate.

If our goal is to prepare students for college or a career, we must end this practice. SB 3 does require failing students to take an "accelerated instruction program", but there is no way to ensure that students learn anything in this program. In addition, schools that habitually promote failing students face no consequences.

**Recommendations: Require students to pass the assessment to be promoted. If the "accelerated instruction program" is used, require students to pass a test at the end of the program to demonstrate improvement. Require the commissioner to lower accountability ratings for districts and schools who socially promote students that later fail assessments. Require districts and schools to publicize social promotion rates and results.**

#### Issue 4: Accountability Ratings

SB 3 allows the top 25% of districts and campuses in student achievement to receive a distinction that exempts them from many rules. This distinction is based solely on how the district or school compares to others and does not take into account their actual performance in meeting postsecondary readiness goals. Second, SB 3 contains few guidelines or limits for other distinctions so that, conceivably, every school in the state could receive some sort of distinction. Third, it appears that districts and schools that are rated "accredited—warned" or "accredited—probation" can receive distinctions even though they are not meeting student progress goals. Fourth, it appears that SB 3 does not require student results to be disaggregated by NCLB

subgroups. Next, there is little proportionality in the school ratings. Finally, SB 3 allows for districts and schools to be accredited under “comparable growth”—i.e. doing as well or better as other similar districts. If we adopt “required improvement” measures to rate performance, the “comparable improvement” category is no longer necessary as districts and schools success can be measured with appropriate growth and value-added assessments.

**Recommendations: Tie the student achievement distinction to postsecondary readiness goals and set basic criteria or limits for the other distinctions. Do not allow schools that are “accredited-warned” or “accredited-probation” to receive distinctions. Ensure that data is disaggregated by NCLB subgroups. Increase proportionality in the rating system. Remove the “comparable improvement” measure from the performance indicators.**

Issue 5: Growth and Value-Added Models

One of the most important provisions of SB 3 is the adoption of a growth-to-standard model to measure increases in student performance. However, SB 3 doesn’t include specific requirements for the properties or functions of this model.

**Recommendation: Include specific requirements for both the structure and the functions of the growth-to-standard student achievement model.**

Thank you for your consideration. If you have questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Texas Association of Business  
Texas Institute for Education Reform  
Texas Public Policy Foundation  
Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce  
Education Trust, Southwest